



AUDIO/VIDEO AUTOMATED PAYMENT FACILITY

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to the field of automated payment facilities, such as exit facilities for parking garage or parking lot applications.

[0002] Exit facilities for parking lots and parking garages are well known. In the typical exit facility, an exit gate bars egress from the parking area until payment has been registered. In a typical parking facility, a live attendant sits within a tollbooth at the exit. The attendant calculates the value of parking, receives payment and activates the gate to permit a vehicle to pass.

[0003] In recent years, automation has reached the exit facility for parking lots and parking garages. In the automated system, a vehicle operator pays the cost of a parking validation ticket at a remote site. The ticket itself is encoded to indicate that payment has been received. The vehicle operator then proceeds to the exit facility where the validated ticket is read and registered. When the appropriate payment signal is sensed by the exit equipment, the gate opens allowing egress. One difficulty in facilities of this type is that the payment feature is isolated from the exit facility. In a typical situation, live attendants occupy adjacent booths to take payment in the likely event that the commuter fails to validate his/her parking ticket prior to exit.

Thus, while this type of automated facility obtains some of the benefits of the automation, it still does not completely satisfy or achieve the objective of a fully automated system. In fact, in a typical installation, more vehicles pass through the operator attendant booths than the fully automated booth.

[0004] One decided advantage of the live parking attendant is the capability of human interaction. Even in these days of automation, many individuals still prefer the human touch, particular when one is paying money. The fully automated systems do not have the capability of providing any human interaction, which often makes these types of systems undesirable in spite of the conveniences that they may otherwise present.

[0005] There remains a need for an automated payment facility that combines the benefits of the human attendant with the benefits of the automated system.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] In order to address these needs, the present invention contemplates an automated payment facility that permits human interaction with the walk-up or drive-up customer. In one embodiment, a central monitoring station is linked to a number of remote facilities, such as exit facilities at parking lots or garages. Each exit facility includes means for assessing and receiving a payment amount. For an exit facility in connection with a parking lot, this means includes means for assessing a payment amount that can comprise a ticket reader, a processor for calculating a time duration and associated fee, and a display for displaying the fee amount to the customer. The overall means can also include means for receiving the payment amount, which can further comprise a credit/debit card reader and/or cash acceptor, in addition to software within the processor capable of processing the payment. All of these components can be of known design and can all operate to control an exit gate mechanism as is known in the art.

[0007] The present invention contemplates the novel addition of means for providing two-way video and audio communication with the central monitoring facility remote from each payment terminal. In the preferred embodiment, this means comprises a digital video camera, a monitor or video display and an audio

speaker and microphone element at both the payment terminal and the central monitoring facility. The communication means can be continuously activated, automatically activated when a customer approaches or access the exit terminal, or on issuance of a help request by the customer through the exit terminal. When activated, the communication means provides for two-way human-to-human interaction between the customer and a remote live attendant.

[0008] In one aspect of the invention, this two-way communication feature can allow the customer to speak directly to a live attendant to at least verbally address problems that may have been encountered at the facility. The communication feature can also be used as a security or emergency call capability. In a preferred embodiment, the remote attendant can access the processor of the remote payment terminal to perform a variety of functions. For instance, the attendant can troubleshoot components of the exit facility, determine a proper payment amount, or process payment of the requisite fee. The terminal processor can also be remotely accessed by the central attendant to directly activate the exit facility, such as by raising the exit gate to allow the customer to exit.

[0009] The two-way communication feature allows the customer to remain in contact with the remote attendant until the particular transaction is complete. In addition, the feature allows a central monitoring station to be linked to a plurality of remote

terminals, such as parking payment and exit facilities. The central monitoring station can include a P/C that is linked to each remote terminal in a variety of ways. Preferably, the link is established through an Ethernet or the Internet, or through a direct communication line, including a land-line or a satellite link.

[0010] The P/C allows the remote attendant to access any of the linked payment terminals, either in response to a signal from the terminal itself or at the attendant's own behest. Thus, a single attendant can be available to communicate with several payment terminals, in lieu of the prior approach of manning a payment booth at each facility. A bank of P/C's and associated attendants can work from the central monitoring station to communicate with dozens of remote facilities, providing the human touch to each facility regardless of the location of the central station and the remote facilities.

[0011] It is one important object of the present invention to provide human interaction at a remote terminal, such as a payment terminal at a parking facility. Another object is to maintain this direct human interaction with a large number of remote terminals, while minimizing the manpower requirements for providing this service.

[0012] One clear benefit achieved by the present invention is that a customer at a remote facility can readily reach a human to help address problems occurring at the facility. Another benefit is

that a remote attendant at a central station can monitor and control the remote facility as required.

[0013] These and other objects and benefits will become apparent upon consideration of the following written description and accompanying figures.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

[0014] **Fig. 1** is a side diagrammatic representation of an exit facility in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

[0015] **Fig. 2** is a block diagram of the components of the exit facility shown in **Fig. 1**.

[0016] **Fig. 3** is a block diagram of the components of a universally monitored and administered array of exit facilities.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0017] For the purposes of promoting an understanding of the principles of the invention, reference will now be made to the embodiments illustrated in the drawings and specific language will be used to describe the same. It will nevertheless be understood that no limitation of the scope of the invention is thereby intended. The inventions includes any alterations and further modifications in the illustrated devices and described methods and further applications of the principles of the invention which would normally occur to one skilled in the art to which the invention relates.

[0018] The present invention contemplates integrating video conferencing capabilities with an automated payment terminal. The following description of the preferred embodiment envisions use of the invention as part of a parking facility. However, it should be understood that other applications of the inventive concepts disclosed herein are contemplated beyond the illustrated embodiment.

[0019] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the invention, an exit facility **10**, for a parking garage for example, includes a gate mechanism **11** that restricts egress from the parking structure. A payment terminal **20** is provided that controls

the operation of the gate mechanism **11**. The payment terminal **20** can remain generally dormant until a vehicle arrives at the exit facility **10**. In other words, the electrically powered components of the terminal **20** can be retained in a standby condition or a reduced power condition until the terminal **20** is fully activated. This activation can occur by a pressure switch adjacent the terminal **20**, a sensing eye, or by operator interaction with the terminal itself.

[0020] In one feature of the preferred embodiment, the payment terminal **20** includes a series of sequential instruction displays **22**, **23** and **24**. Preferably, each display is back-lighted or illuminated to be readily visible by the driver. In addition, most preferably each of the displays **22-24** is illuminated in sequence to indicate the next step to be performed in the payment process.

[0021] In the instance in which the payment terminal **20** is activated by the presence of the vehicle, the first display **22** can be illuminated to identify the location in which the vehicle operator inserts the parking ticket. Specifically, the ticket is inserted into a ticket reader **28**. The ticket can be of any conventional type, such as Hollerith, scan-stripped or bar-coded, and the reader can be of a known type capable of reading the particular ticket. The payment terminal **20** includes a microprocessor **65** (see **Fig. 2**) that registers the ticket inserted into the reader **28** and determines the duration at the parking facility and the required fee. It also is envisioned that the ticket reader **28** and the

associated software can identify prepaid tickets, user passes, discount cards and other indicia on the ticket to identify a particular payment regime. In some instances, such as in the case of a parking pass, the central processor **65** can be configured to identify the ticket inserted into the reader **28** as providing automatic egress, in which instance, the processor **65** provides a instruction on the gate signal line **68** to raise the gate mechanism **11**.

[0022] However, in the typical instance, the processor **65** will undertake a calculation to determine the requisite fee. At that point, the display **22** is turned off, and the next display **23** is illuminated. This display identifies the location for payment by the vehicle operator. The required payment amount is shown in the fee display **30**, which is again controlled by the central processor **65** in a known manner. In accordance with the most preferred embodiment, two general payment approaches are permitted. In the first, a credit card reader **32** can scan a credit card, debit card, prepaid value card or a validation coupon (such as a validated parking ticket). In the second, a cash acceptor **33** accepts conventional bills. A coin acceptance unit can also be incorporated as a payment vehicle. In the event that a credit or debit card is inserted into the reader **32**, the central processor **65** can activate known software which performs the necessary credit check to evaluate the validity and credit worthiness of the card to determine whether payment can be accepted through this means.

If the card is "rejected", the reader **32** operates to eject the card. The fee display **30** can be altered to provide an additional display indicating that the credit card payment method has been rejected, thereby requiring a cash payment.

[0023] Once an appropriate amount of cash payment has been inserted into the cash acceptor **33**, or an appropriate credit card **32** has been evaluated by the reader **32**, the display **23** is de-energized, and the next display **24** is illuminated. This display identifies the location of the receipt printer **35** in which a paper receipt is produced for the vehicle driver. In addition, if cash is provided at the acceptor **33**, the central processor **65** determines whether the inserted cash exceeds the requisite payment amount. In this instance, appropriate change is dispensed through the change dispenser **36**.

[0024] As thus far described the payment terminal **20** parallels many known "pay on foot" stations, or fully automated payment stations. In accordance with an important feature of the present invention, the payment terminal **20** includes what amounts to a video conferencing capability. Specifically, the terminal **20** includes a digital video camera **40**, a monitor or video display **42** and communication speakers/microphones **43** and **44**. As described in more detail herein, the payment terminal **20** is remotely connected to a workstation occupied by a human. A video camera transmits an image of the attendant to the payment terminal **20** for display on the monitor **42**. Likewise, two-way

communication between the attendant and the driver is facilitated by the speakers/microphones **43** and **44**. The video camera **40** transmits an image of the person at the payment terminal to provide the live attendant with commensurate human interaction.

[0025] In one embodiment, the video and audio interaction features of the payment terminal **20** are constantly activated, or at a minimum activated when the payment terminal **20** is activated. Alternatively, the video conferencing capabilities can be accessed through the help button **38**. The terminal **20** can include an easily and clearly identified help button **38** that can be depressed to send a signal from the payment terminal **20** to the remote monitoring station. Depressing the help button **38** can automatically activate the video conferencing equipment, namely, the camera **40**, the display **42** and the speaker/microphones **43**, **44**. Alternatively, the attendant can remotely energize the video conferencing equipment, once from the payment terminal **20**.

[0026] When the video conferencing component of the payment terminal **20** is activated, the consumer, such as a vehicle driver, can directly interact with the remote-based attendant. At this point, the driver can identify specific problems that are being encountered, such as the ticket reader **28** is failing to read the parking ticket, the cash acceptor **33** is not accepting the cash, the credit card reader is rejecting the credit/debit card, no receipt has been generated, or no change has been received. Moreover, and

perhaps most importantly, the activation of the video conferencing can be used as a safety or alert feature.

[0027] The attendant can have a varying range of control over the components of the payment terminal and can remotely access the central processor **65** of the payment terminal **20**. For instance, the remote attendant can execute a diagnostic routine that determines whether any of the electronic or mechanical components of the terminal has malfunctioned. The live attendant can help resolve credit/debit card issues. In case of a failure of the ticket reader, the attendant can verbally receive the length of time that the vehicle has been parked directly from the vehicle operator (of course, relying upon the "honor system" in this regard). The remote attendant can remotely calculate the appropriate fee and can activate the fee display and associated software within the central processor **65**. Finally, but not exclusively, the remote operator can initiate a signal on the gate signal line **68** to open the gate mechanism **11** depending upon the outcome of the video conferencing.

[0028] In order to accomplish this human interaction through video conferencing the payment terminal **20** includes a remote processor unit **50**. The remote processor **50** is preferably a PC-based system with some limited computing power and limited memory. Most significantly, the remote processing unit **50** is provided with some means for communicating with a remote-based attendant.

[0029] In the preferred embodiment, the remote processor unit **50** includes an input control module **54** that communicates with the ticket reader **28**, credit card reader **32** and cash acceptor **33**. The input control module **54** can provide two-way communication with each of the various readers to receive digital signals indicative of data contained on the ticket and send control signals to the reader/acceptor electronics. The input control model **54** can communicate with a fee calculation module **56** which can calculate the appropriate parking fee based on validation of the parking ticket through the reader **28**, and then ultimately determine whether the fee has been paid. The fee calculation module **56** can also determine whether the fee has been overpaid by payment through the cash acceptor **33** and determine the amount of change to be dispensed through the change dispenser **36**. The fee calculation module **56** communicates with the central processor **65**, which can then appropriately control other components of the terminal **20**.

[0030] The remote processor unit **50** also includes a display control module **58**, which is connected to the sequential displays **22-24**. The display control module **58** can include a switching network to turn on and off the illumination for each of the displays, based upon signals received from the central processor **65**.

[0031] A communication control module **60** is provided to accomplish the video conferencing features. This module is

connected to the video camera **40**, the monitor/video display **42** and the speaker/microphones **43, 44**. The display control module **58** also communicates with and is controlled by the central processor **65** to transmit and receive audio and video signals.

[0032] The remote processor unit **50** also includes an output control module **62** that controls the display on the fee display **30**, the generation of a receipt through the receipt printer **35**, and the discharge of change through change dispenser **36**. Again, the output control module **62** is controlled by signals from the central processor **65**. Moreover, the central processor **65** provides a signal on gate signal line **68** to the gate mechanism in **11** instructing the mechanism to raise or lower as a function of the activity occurring at the payment terminal **20**.

[0033] It is understood that each of the basic modules can be readily implemented in hardware, electronics and software or a combination thereof, which is all within the skill of the ordinary artisan in this field. Preferably, as indicated above, the remote processor unit **50** is a personal computer, which can then include a number of software routines to perform the various modular functions. In addition, the processor unit **50** can include a memory **66** associated with the central processor **65**. This memory can be continuously accessed by the central processor **65** to obtain pricing information. In addition, the memory **66** can store information from each payment transaction. This data can then be downloaded through the payment terminal **20**, or more

preferably periodically transmitted to a remote monitoring station for evaluation. The data stored within the memory and/or transmitted to the central monitoring station can include the number of vehicles passing through the exit facility **10**, the average stay of a particular vehicle in the facility, the number of malfunctions or errors occurring, and other information indicative of the performance of the payment terminal **20**.

[0034] In order to effect the communication from the payment terminal **20** to a remote monitoring facility **75**, the remote processor **50** also includes a communication module **70** that can provide immediate and direct communication through a data link **71**, as depicted in **Fig. 3**. In one embodiment, the communication module can be a hard-wired link to a remote location. For instance, in a building that includes a parking facility, the remote monitoring personnel can be the building attendant.

[0035] However, most preferably, the datalink **71** is accomplished through an Internet or Ethernet connection. In this instance, the communication module **70** can include a modem capable of making a remote **75** or dial-up connection. Thus, a remote or central monitoring station can be located virtually any place in the world and still provide the video conferencing and human interaction features of the present invention. Referring to **Fig. 3**, a number of communication modules **70_A-70_{zz}**, corresponding to a like member of widely dispersed payment terminals, are shown linked to a central monitoring station **75**.

The monitoring station includes its own communication module **77** that can administer the flow of data from each of the independent and remote payment terminals to and from remote station. For instance, the module **77** can include a communication modem and software to avoid conflicts and data crashing.

[0036] The central monitoring station **75** can include a personal computer **79** with a video display, a video camera **80**, and a speaker/microphone system **81**, all similar to the like components found on the payment terminal **20**. Thus, the video camera transmits an image of the human attendant at the remote monitoring station **75**, while the speaker/microphone accomplishes two-way communication. The remote attendant can perform the various monitoring and communication functions described above through the PC **79**.

[0037] In a most preferred embodiment, the PC **79** includes software that permits multiple displays on the PC monitor as audio/video data is received from individual ones of the payment terminals **20**. Alternatively, the display seen by the remote attendant can be scrolled from payment terminal to payment terminal. Of course, if the attendant were working with a driver at one payment terminal, request from help from another payment terminal would ordinarily be delayed. Most preferably, the central monitoring station can include a number attendants, each jointly monitoring all of the remote payment terminals affiliated with that monitoring station the instance where multiple help requests are

incoming to the monitoring station **75**, the requests can be conveyed to successively available attendants.

[0038] The local monitoring/video display **42** at the payment terminal **20** can receive and display other images when not being used to communicate with the remote station. For instance, the monitor can display advertisements, or describe events occurring in the city, provide weather or traffic information, or virtually any kind of information that is desired. The same Ethernet or Internet link can be used to provide a wide range of video display when the attendant is busy or when an attendant is not required.

[0039] In the preferred illustrated embodiment, the inventive payment facility finds great utility in connection with a vehicle parking facility. The same inventive concepts can be used with "pay-on-foot" stations, street-side parking meters, entry facilities such as for a building, museum, exhibit or concert, and the like. The video conferencing capability not only adds a human touch, it also provides access to a decision-marker who can field questions and provide immediate solutions.

[0040] In the most preferred embodiment, the payment facilities are linked to the central monitoring facility using an internet-type connection. Each payment facility, or at a minimum each video camera, can be IP addressable. Similar technology is incorporated into videoware provided by CUseeME Networks, Inc., which videoware could be readily adapted for use with the present inventive system.

[0041] Each payment facility can include its own payment processing capability, as described above. An independent dial-up type connection can be provided as is known in the art. Alternatively, credit/debit card payments can be processed through the central facility.

[0042] While the invention has been illustrated and described in detail in the drawings and foregoing description, the same is to be considered as illustrative and not restrictive in character. It should be understood that only the preferred embodiments have been shown and described and that all changes and modifications that come within the spirit of the invention are desired to be protected.